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Understanding 'Sectarianism'

Sunni–Shi'a Relations in the Modern Arab World

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements vii

Introduction 1

1. What is 'Sectarianism'? 15
2. The Study of Sectarian Relations: Key Debates 49
3. The Many Dimensions of Modern Sectarian Identity 81
4. Sectarian Identity in the Era of the Nation-State 125
5. Sunni–Shi'a Relations: An Imbalanced Divide 167
6. 2003 and the 'Sectarian Wave' 217
7. Iraq, 2003–2018: Sectarian Identity and the Contestation of the State 265

Conclusion 319

Bibliography 327

Index 357

INTRODUCTION

Is there any call for yet another book on 'sectarianism'? After all, over the past two decades or so, few subfields of Middle Eastern studies or Islamic studies have attracted more scholarly, and some not so scholarly, attention than 'sectarianism', particularly in relation to the Sunni–Shi'a divide. Anyone with a sustained interest in the subject cannot but notice the enormous growth – not just quantitatively but thankfully in qualitative terms as well – of the literature; so why burden the bookshelves with another volume on a subject that has attracted no end of analysis, column inches and, in some cases, outright hot air? To begin with, while this book is about sectarian identity (specifically and exclusively Sunni–Shi'a identities) this is not a book about 'sectarianism': in fact one of the primary and more ambitious – pie in the sky, some might say – purposes of this book is to finally liberate the study of sectarian identity and sectarian relations from the cognitive shackles of the term 'sectarianism'; a term so opaque, circuitous, negatively charged, politically controversial and emotive as to be meaningless (hence the quote marks). As will be discussed in the opening chapter, my objection to the term 'sectarianism' should not be taken to mean a rejection of the study of sectarian identities, sectarian relations or any other sect-coded process or phenomenon; rather, in rejecting 'sectarianism' I am proposing the abandonment of an absurdly catch-all phrase that encompasses so much as to stand in

the way of coherent debate – how can a debate adequately cohere if its parameters are so hazy? In conferences, in commentary and in the literature, one all too often gets the impression that discussants are talking past each other in the absence of agreement as to the basic terms of reference and their meaning. While there is no shortage of studies problematizing the term 'sectarianism' there has been little in the way of serious theorization of alternatives that go beyond yet more definitions of 'sectarianism', thereby ultimately making an already circuitous debate all the more labyrinthine. In this book I try to go beyond just admiring the problem, or what Kieran Healy critiqued as the tendency to "equate calling for a more sophisticated approach to a theoretical problem with actually providing one."[1] To that end, this book attempts to formulate a theoretical framework that might enable us to cut the conceptual umbilical cord that is 'sectarianism' and to start exploring the innumerable phenomena that the term encompasses and how these relate to each other.

The many ways in which 'sectarianism' is framed, used and understood and the bewildering array of things that it is used to refer to – from innocuous sectarian insularity all the way to sectarian murder – will be covered in chapter 1. For now, it suffices to point out that, however the term is used and however it is understood, 'sectarianism' is necessarily a function of, or is related to, sectarian identity. Yet despite that, surveying the literature, one notices a surprising lack of attention given to sectarian identities. Rather, their meaning, contours, inner dynamics and so forth are assumed and then obscured by the analytical black hole that is 'sectarianism'. In other words, the *ism* has overshadowed the root, creating a ripple effect of confusion as to the parameters, content and drivers of sectarian dynamics. A central contention of this book, therefore, is that we firstly need to discard the cumbersome and entirely unnecessary frame of 'sectarianism' and, secondly, that we should instead direct our analytic focus towards understanding sectarian *identity*. The failure to do so thus far, and our obsession with the *ism* at the expense of the identity, have left us chasing the chimeric shadows of the former at the cost of understanding the latter.

[1] Kieran Healy, "Fuck Nuance," *Sociological Theory*, 35:2 (2017): 121.

In attempting to consign the term 'sectarianism' to terminal redundancy, this book tries to introduce a new theoretical framework that might better enable us to understand sectarian identity and to more effectively unpack the plethora of subjects, dynamics and processes that are covered by 'sectarianism'. One of the reasons that the term has proven so difficult to define is that it has, practically speaking, become shorthand for the many facets of sectarian identity and sectarian relations. This, it seems to me, is the reason that, as already mentioned, scholars of the subject often end up speaking past each other: one assumes 'sectarianism' to refer to matters of doctrinal incompatibility, while another would understand it to mean the instrumentalization of sectarian categories in geopolitics; yet another supposes it refers to the institutionalization of sectarian identities in governance and national politics, while another presumes the phrase to indicate hatred between sects, and so on and so forth. It is not that any one of these is right or wrong, it is that they are each focusing on a different aspect of the same multidimensional subject. Accordingly, rather than trying to identify which individual approach is (in)correct, what is needed is for us to redefine the subject in a way that reflects the inherent multidimensionality of sectarian identity. The failure to do so is especially problematic where it becomes definitional: unidimensional definitions of 'sectarianism' end up painting sectarian dynamics, and by extension sectarian identity, in unrealistically monochrome ways. We can avoid this and help move the debate forward by acknowledging that 'sectarianism' is a reductionist and sloppy way of referring to the many facets of sectarian identity; at this point we can then start thinking about the layered nature of sectarian identities and the multiple ways they are imagined and manifested. For example, on one level, Sunni and Shi'a identities clearly signify adherence to or association with a doctrinal belief system or a set of metaphysical or religious truths underpinning a group's normative understanding of authority, community, spirituality and the relation to a higher power. In this framing, sectarian identity comes to mean membership in the collective that subscribes or professes loyalty to, and is defined by, these religious truths – be they metaphysical (for example, beliefs regarding creation, salvation or eschatology) or temporal (as in the divergent readings of post-Prophetic Islamic history). By extension, in this framing, sectarian

division and sectarian contestation become functions of incompatible doctrines with the sectarian other being othered for their doctrinal heterodoxy if not heresy: the other is defined, accepted or rejected on the basis of their beliefs and the extent to which they accord with or diverge from a given conception of truth and orthodoxy. This is a self-evidently valid and relevant framing of sectarian identity, one that is often overlooked in the literature perhaps as a function of our secular biases. However, and herein lies the point, there are limits to this validity and it would simply be counterfactual to adopt such an understanding as the sole definer of, or frame for, sectarian identity, or to reduce sectarian dynamics to a matter of clashing doctrines.

To illustrate, a fundamentalist cleric may define and reject the sectarian other based on their beliefs and their reading of Islamic history, yet how relevant is that to the way that Sunni–Shi'a prejudices are governed in, say, the Lebanese context today? How relevant have doctrinal matters been to Sunni–Shi'a contestation in the Lebanese political system after the Taif Accord of 1989 or indeed how relevant were they to broader Muslim and non-Muslim sectarian competition during the civil war that preceded it? Is the fact that Hizbullah, Lebanon's most powerful and relevant Shi'a actor today, is an adherent of Iran's revolutionary doctrine of *wilayat al-faqih* the sole determinant of Sunni–Shi'a relations and Sunni–Shi'a competition in Lebanon? Or is something more tangible and less abstract also at stake: the respective shares of, and access to, the Lebanese state that the supposed representatives of Sunnis and Shi'as have and the relations of power governing sectarian relations in Lebanon perhaps? Likewise, does the unmistakable overlap between class prejudice and sectarian prejudice (in Lebanon and elsewhere) render matters of doctrine superfluous to sectarian prejudice? Or, alternatively, is the matter one of competing transnational visions? Does not Hizbullah's role in the region and relations with Iran (even prior to the Syrian conflict) feed sectarian (Sunni–Shi'a) competition and resentment in Lebanon? Needless to say, rather than having to choose any one of these frames or debating which is more important, we ought to accept the obvious fact that all are relevant and all are essential to how sectarian identity is imagined, experienced and projected. Accordingly, rather than viewing these as separate approaches to the understanding of sectarian dynamics, we

should instead view them as integral in that they collectively form the contours of sectarian dynamics.

The theoretical approach introduced in this book frames sectarian identity as the sum of its parts; specifically, it will be argued that sectarian identity is simultaneously formulated along four overlapping, interconnected and mutually informing dimensions: doctrinal, subnational, national and transnational. Which of these is more relevant, which helps us better understand causality or which better explains sectarian dynamics is entirely context-dependent – with the proviso that no single dimension can be taken in complete isolation from the others. By thinking of sectarian identity in this way we can better appreciate its malleability: not *just* a tool of political elites seeking to secure their power and privilege; not *just* a matter of dogma and belief; not *just* a political issue or a frame for intergroup competition at the subnational level. An appreciation of this malleability and multidimensionality is important to understanding the dynamics of sectarian identity, what is at stake from one context to another, and what drives the waxing and waning of sectarian competition. To illustrate the tangible relevance of these dimensions and the differences between them: a Sunni-centric politician in Iraq or Lebanon for example, can still have ties to and even intermarry with Shi'as on the basis of shared economic interests or other commonalities such as shared socio-economic or ideological background; however, in contexts where doctrine matters more – say, in the case of a Sunni fundamentalist cleric – such interlinkages would be less likely. Put simply, that a Sunni-centric Iraqi politician would be married to a Shi'a is fairly unremarkable (and indeed there are several such cases today); however, it would be downright astonishing if it were to emerge that Saudi Arabian fundamentalist cleric Nasir al-Omar is married to a Shi'a given his visceral hostility to Shi'ism and to Shi'as *qua* Shi'as.[2] This is not just a question of degree between moderate Sunni-centric politicians and a far more extreme fundamentalist cleric. Rather, it is a matter of substantive difference in how the meaning and significance of sectarian identity and how the lines of contestation in

[2] For al-Omar's views of Shi'ism, see Nasir al-Omar, *Waqi' al-Rafidha fi Bilad al-Tawhid* (The Reality of the Rafidha [Shi'a] in the Land of Monotheism), self-published, available at https://eldorar.net/science/article/13802.

sectarian competition are differently formulated from one dimension to another. Sectarian competition for a mainstream sect-centric politician in a context of acknowledged and accepted sectarian plurality is a matter of contested national truths, contested hierarchies of power, and differential access to and ownership of the nation-state; for someone like al-Omar, however, it is a matter of religious truths and doctrine. We need to be able to identify, understand and account for these and other manifestations of sectarian dynamics, and it is hoped that the multidimensional framework introduced in this book can help further that kind of conceptual flexibility.

At a more fundamental level, greater awareness of sectarian identity's multidimensionality is needed for greater accuracy and better understanding of sectarian dynamics. The importance of this can scarcely be exaggerated given the policy relevance of the subject and the reckless way in which the terminology is used in relation to conflict and politics in the contemporary Middle East. Urgently needed is a demystification of sectarian categories. This cannot be done while continuing to use the term 'sectarianism', a term so hazy that it goes beyond being merely an "essentially contested concept" (like democracy or social justice, for example) and rather becomes the subject of a definitional free-for-all in which all manner of personal preferences and political agendas can be projected onto the word.[3] To give an extreme example, in 2016 I heard a North American scholar argue, at an academic conference, that contemporary Muslim 'sectarianism' in the Middle East was a function of white supremacy. Such bizarre linkages reflect the unconstrained way in which understandings of the term are formulated. Moreover, as will be seen, the term's opacity facilitates a fetishization of sectarian identity whereby it is endowed with far more causal and explanatory power and socio-political relevance than is necessary or reasonable. In the process the term 'sectarianism' reinforces the essentialization of the Middle East as somehow different, if not aberrant, while also reinforcing conventional fallacies about the role of religion in the region. On a practical level this often leads to

[3] Walter Bryce Gallie, "Essentially Contested Concepts," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 56 (1955–1956): 167–198. My thanks to Morten Valbjorn for drawing my attention to Gallie's work.

analytic misdirection towards symptoms rather than causes. A typical case in point is the tendency to view the sect-coding of patronage networks as a function of sectarian identities and sectarian loyalties while ignoring structural drivers such as under-institutionalization, endemic corruption, lack of transparency and the like. In this way sectarian identity – or more commonly 'sectarianism' – undeservedly steals the analytic limelight. Why are Donald Trump's antics and messaging considered examples of populism while his sect-centric equivalents in the Middle East are examples of 'sectarianism'? Why are patron-client networks called 'sectarianism' in Lebanon but clientelism elsewhere? Why are discriminatory, personalized hiring practices referred to as patrimonialism in some settings but 'sectarianism' where Sunnis and Shi'as are involved? Why is an Iraqi politician forming webs of personalized interest regarded as an example of 'sectarianism' while the same is referred to as 'big man politics' in sub-Saharan Africa? Not all interactions between Sunnis and Shi'as – conflictual or otherwise – are a function of sectarian dynamics and, even where they are, the relevance and role of sectarian identity need to be correctly contextualized rather than unthinkingly assumed. To paraphrase a similar critique of the concept of race, so long as we fetishize sect, we ensure we will never be rid of the hierarchies it imposes.[4]

Another aim of this book and of the multidimensional framework it introduces is to help move the discussion of sectarian relations and sectarian identity beyond the rather dated and circuitous debates that continue to dominate the field – for example, the classic and largely redundant binary between instrumentalists and primordialists or that between 'sectarianism' as religion and 'sectarianism' as politics. As will be seen in chapter 2, a lot of these are a function of the problematic nature of the term 'sectarianism' and the result of an insufficiently agile and multidimensional framing of sectarian dynamics. One such binary, one that is rarely challenged, is that between sectarian harmony and sectarian division or conflict. While reductionists will adopt a minimalist position that emphasizes the former and alarmists

[4] Thomas Chatterton Williams, "How Ta-Nehisi Coates gives whiteness power," *New York Times*, Oct. 6, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/06/opinion/ta-nehisi-coates-whiteness-power.html.

will adopt a maximalist position that overplays the latter, few consider the obvious: rather than explicit division or consciously performed ecumenism, a far more common setting in Sunni–Shi'a relations is sectarian irrelevance. Not every act of kindness or act of enmity between a Sunni and a Shi'a is animated by their sectarian identities, and not every interaction lends itself to positive or negative value judgements or sect-coding. Like other people across the world, most Sunni–Shi'a interactions are banal or transactional. Affirmations of sectarian harmony or of sectarian hate are more a feature of times of crisis; otherwise, what is more commonly being affirmed in Sunni–Shi'a interactions is mundane coexistence. As with many of the binaries that dominate the field, the unity–division binary is a false one, one that will be revisited at several junctures in this book. More broadly, the layered framework introduced here will allow us to better grasp the fluidity of sectarian identity and to encourage us to think of sectarian dynamics in terms of an ever-evolving process of identity formation and interrelation rather than a reflection of static conceptions of identity encapsulated in unhelpful binaries and meaningless terms like 'sectarianism'.

A few cautionary words as to what this book is not. It is not a history of Sunni–Shi'a relations nor is it a history of sectarian dynamics in the twenty-first century. The book is an attempt to formulate a clearer conceptual framework with which such histories can be written. In doing so, I will not be delving into the early history of the Sunni–Shi'a divide for the simple reason that I do not believe that events and disputes in the early centuries of Islam are what animate sectarian relations today. Of course, basic familiarity with this foundational background is essential but it is not the subject of this book: as will be argued, early Islamic history and the genesis of the Sunni–Shi'a divide may furnish modern sectarian competition with some of its discursive and symbolic props and some of its mobilizational tools but they are neither a causal nor an explanatory variable in Sunni–Shi'a dynamics today.[5] That is not to dismiss the relevance of history, and chapters 2

[5] For the early emergence of the Sunni–Shi'a divide, see, among others, Barnaby Rogerson, *The Heirs of Muhammad: Islam's First Century and the Origins of the Sunni–Shia Split* (New York: Overlook Press, 2008); Lesley Hazleton, *After the Prophet: The Epic*

to 4 make regular forays into the later medieval and, more so, early-modern periods in search of roots of and parallels to contemporary sectarian relations. However, again, this is not a work of history and I make no claim to being a medievalist or an Ottomanist. The temporal and geographic scope of this book is very specific: as already mentioned, the sects referred to throughout are only Sunni and (Twelver) Shi'a Muslims – the spectral nature of both notwithstanding – and my primary interest is in modern sectarian relations. Geographically the book is similarly restricted: while examples and parallels from beyond the Arab world and beyond Sunni–Shi'a relations will be drawn upon for comparative purposes, the book nevertheless restricts its focus to Sunni and Shi'a Muslims in the modern Arab world. Despite this relatively restricted scope there will inevitably be an element of generalization when discussing categories as immense as these. This is unavoidable but, while it is something we should approach with caution, it need not be a bar to examining Sunni–Shi'a dynamics. In other words, while nothing can be said about *all* Sunnis or *all* Shi'as, we can nevertheless sensibly identify context-dependent dominant trends in ever-fluctuating perceptions of self and other, and contingent modes of identity formation among self-professed Sunnis and Shi'as (or critical masses thereof). More to the point, even if 'Sunnis' and 'Shi'as' do not exist as coherent groups, they certainly exist as identity categories – no matter how contested, fluid, ambiguous or variously perceived – and have existed for centuries: not for nothing did Sunni medieval chroniclers – from Ibn Kathir to Ibn al-Athir to the storied Ibn Battuta – refer to Shi'as (usually by using what by then had become the derogatory term *rafidha*).[6] This does not primordialize sectarian

Story of the Shia–Sunni Split (New York: Anchor Books, 2010); Najam Haider, *The Origins of the Shi'a: Identity, Ritual and Sacred Space in Eighth-Century Kufa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); John McHugo, *A Concise History of Sunnis and Shi'is* (London: Saqi Books, 2017).

[6] *Rafidha* (also rendered *rawafidh*, singular *rafidhi*) is a derogatory term for Shi'as. Its root is *rafdh*, meaning rejection, and is a reference to the Shi'a rejection of the first three caliphs. For the earlier, intra-Shi'a use of the term to distinguish proto-Zaydiyya from proto-Imamiyya, see Etan Kohlberg, "The Term 'Rafida' in Imami Shi'i Usage," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 99:4 (Oct.–Dec., 1979): 677–679. My thanks to Ahab Bdaiwi for drawing my attention to this.

identities nor is recognizing their medieval antecedents equal to essentializing them. As will be repeatedly argued throughout, while sectarian identities may have existed for centuries, their salience, relevance, meaning and content have continuously fluctuated in response to the broader context. The issue therefore is not their age or longevity, but how they have been variously constructed and mediated over time and space.

The Sunni–Shi'a divide is of course not equally relevant across the region, and the book is primarily, though not entirely, informed by the examples of Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain and Syria. Using the conceptual framework outlined above, I try to shed light on how sectarian identities are formulated and experienced – how they 'work' – in these contexts. I should also point out that, despite my previous work on Iraq, this book is not an 'Iraq book'; rather than painting the other countries with an Iraqi brush, I endeavour to treat Iraq as one of a handful of primary points of reference (chapter 7 notwithstanding). The opening chapter of the book interrogates the term 'sectarianism' and makes the case for its abandonment. In doing so I survey the field and highlight the various ways in which the term is used and understood. The chapter will also outline why the term 'sectarianism' is not just unhelpful but actually distortive. This is fundamentally a result of the term's lack of definition and lack of boundaries combined with its assumed negativity. The chapter outlines an alternative semantic framework that does away with 'sectarianism' and also restricts the usage of 'sectarian'. Briefly, it will be argued that 'sectarian' should only be used as a prefix to other terms rather than as a stand-alone adjective ('sectarian hate', 'sectarian identity' rather than accusing someone or something of *being* 'sectarian'). Chapter 2 examines the main debates in the field and particularly the stultifying binaries that have prevented the discussion from moving on to more fertile ground. Essentially, this chapter demonstrates the need for a fundamental shift in how we think about sectarian identity. Having made the case for dropping the term 'sectarianism' and having examined the problems that characterize its attendant discussions, in chapters 3 and 4 I propose an analytical shift in focus to sectarian identity. In doing so, the two chapters outline the multidimensional, four-sided framework with which sectarian identity is best captured. Chapter 3 looks at three

dimensions, doctrinal, subnational and transnational, while chapter 4 looks at the national dimension. The reason that the national dimension is given a whole chapter is partly a reflection of my own research interests but is also a reflection of the immediacy and centrality of the nation-state in political perception and socio-political contestation in the modern world. Having set the theoretical stage, in the remaining chapters I employ this framework to better understand modern sectarian dynamics. Chapter 5 examines the overlooked question of demographics and how conceptions of minorities and majorities have influenced sectarian identity formation and sectarian relations. In doing so, this chapter challenges the false equivalence that is often assumed to apply across the spectrum of Sunni–Shi'a relations. The last two chapters are more case study focused. Chapter 6 looks at the sectarian wave that followed the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and how it transformed sectarian relations and inflated the relevance of sectarian categories in the Middle East and beyond. The final chapter takes modern Iraq as a case study with which to demonstrate many of the themes of the book and with which to illustrate the variable, multidimensional and context-dependent nature of sectarian dynamics. It will also discuss not just the drivers of sectarian entrenchment after 2003 but also the drivers of its retreat in recent years. In this way, the multidimensional model introduced here will help us not just understand the manner in which sectarian relations come to be inflamed but also shed light on the reverse: the de-escalation of sectarian conflict, how sectarian identities lose relevance and how banal coexistence is recaptured.

Finally, to pre-empt criticism of what some may see as an omission: the Islamic State or ISIS does not feature in any significant way in this book – neither conceptually nor in the chapters looking at the post-2003 Middle East. As will be argued throughout, a key characteristic of modern sectarian relations is the paradoxical dialectic between unity and division: the normative value attached to Islamic or national unity versus the imperatives of sect-specificity. This furnishes sectarian relations with both centripetal and centrifugal characteristics, with the dialectic relation between Islamic unity and sect-specificity placing limits on the conceivable extent of both unity and division. Such contradictions are hardly unique to Sunni–Shi'a relations. A pertinent parallel can be found in the way national identities

and regional variances in the Arab world interact with the concept of pan-Arab identity. The late philosopher Muhammad al-Jabiri's summation of the dialectic nature of Arab unity–division is equally applicable to the sectarian divide: "regional [or, for our purposes, sectarian] idiosyncrasies compete with the pan-national [pan-Islamic] whole – but without either the parts or the whole seeking to cancel or negate each other. Such a negation would be a self-defeating act, because the existence of one is dependent and conditional on that of the other."[7] The countries and cases surveyed in this book illustrate the intertwinement of sectarian plurality with normative conceptions of Islam and of nationalism that ultimately serve to position sectarian identities as subsidiary to larger religious and national frames that are themselves subject to internal contestation. As will be seen, this inner tension between unity and division, between sect-specificity and Islamic oneness or sect-blind conceptions of nationalism, is highly elastic in that sectarian relations can be calmed or inflamed but remain highly resistant to a definitive break between Sunnis/Sunnism and Shi'as/Shi'ism without a significant redefinition of what constitutes the parameters of mainstream modern, global Islam and barring a major redefinition of what constitutes acceptable forms of nationalism in the countries surveyed. The extreme case of the Islamic State and their unequivocal, genocidal even, rejection of sectarian plurality is what makes them unusual, though not necessarily unprecedented, in the history of sectarian relations and particularly in the contexts of modern Iraq and Syria.[8] Ultimately, the Islamic State was a symptom of

[7] Muhammad al-Jabiri, *Takwin al-Aql al-Arabi* (The Formation of the Arabic Mind) (Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 2006), p. 52. Quoted in Tim Mackintosh-Smith, *Arabs: A 3,000 Year History of Peoples, Tribes and Empires* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), p. 456.

[8] The rise of Wahhabism in the Arabian Peninsula in the eighteenth to twentieth centuries is a case in point. For the parallels with the Islamic State/ISIS, see Cole Bunzel, "The Kingdom and the Caliphate: Saudi Arabia and the Islamic State," in *Beyond Sunni and Shia: The Roots of Sectarianism in a Changing Middle East*, ed. Frederic Wehrey (London: Hurst & Co., 2017). The term Wahhabi is derived from eighteenth-century Islamic scholar Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. He advocated an extreme form of Hanbali Sunni Islam that condemned all but a narrowly defined conception of Islam and was intrinsically anti-Shi'a. Abd al-Wahhab was instrumental in the rise of the first Saudi state following his alliance with Muhammad bin Saud. That alliance

a broader enabling environment that empowered what was otherwise an anomaly in sectarian relations. My interest lies in understanding the evolution of that environment rather than the exceptional demons that it created.

continued and aided in the survival and resurrection of the Saudi Arabian state. The term Wahhabiyya (or Wahhabism) and its derivative Wahhabi are derogatory terms that are not used self-referentially. The term is better understood as a reference to a political formation (the extreme Hanbalism of the Saudi clergy and the political patronage they receive) rather than a clearly demarcated doctrinal current. In practice, however, and especially in common Shi'a parlance, Wahhabism is often used as a synonym for anti-Shi'a Sunnism and for Salafis more generally.